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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0176

RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0873

RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0089

RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0138

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0060

RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0074

RUEHBBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0099

RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0412

RHMFSS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 ASHGABAT 000619

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (SNELSIRE)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/26/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM ASEC ENRG AF TX

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER MEREDOV TELLS DAS FEIGENBAUM

TURKMENISTAN IS SERIOUS ABOUT INCREASED COOPERATION

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.
4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Deputy Assistant Secretary Evan Feigenbaum's two and a half hour meeting with Foreign Affairs Deputy Chairman Rashit Meredov covered a wide range of issues in a friendly and cooperative atmosphere. At times, Meredov added humor to the discussion. Meredov responded favorably to the invitation to visit the United States and spoke openly about cooperation in a range of areas, including democracy and human rights. Although short on details, Meredov's discussion was sincere and at times enthusiastic, with the exception of a stern and lengthy lecture regarding the suspension of the embassy's Surveillance Detection program. Repeatedly, Meredov emphasized that President Berdimuhamedov should be clearly understood -- he wanted to cooperate with the United States. END SUMMARY

TURNING THE PAGE AFTER SIX MONTHS

¶2. (SBU) At the start of the June 25 meeting between SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary Evan Feigenbaum and Foreign Affairs Deputy Chairman Rashit Meredov, both participants spoke beyond the usual pleasantries. Meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) a few hours after a presidential meeting (septel), Meredov pointed out President Berdimuhamedov's and his own appreciation for recent U.S. efforts to improve the relationship, and also noted his own attempts to inform President Berdimuhamedov of the benefit of U.S. Government programs, based in part on his own personal experience in a 1995 law reform visit to the United

States.

¶13. (SBU) Both Feigenbaum and Meredov took turns summarizing the past six months of delegations and steps in the U.S.-Turkmenistan bilateral relationship. Meredov in particular noted his appreciation of the U.S. approach of using delegations focused on various subjects as a means to make progress in all areas, and how he looked forward to planning continued cooperation in the second half of 2007.

CONTINUED OPENNESS ON PIPELINE DIVERSIFICATION

¶14. (C) Meredov mentioned each of the recent U.S. delegations. Turning to energy, Meredov emphasized the value of PDAS Steven Mann's recent visit, which included more specific suggestions on the development of the energy sector and the diversification of hydrocarbon resource exports. He again noted that a Trans-Caspian Pipeline was ?still on the table,? that Turkmenistan is willing to cooperate with the United States and would welcome the involvement of U.S. companies.

SUPPORT FOR EXCHANGES

¶15. (SBU) Meredov also noted his government's interest in expanding the numbers of students and teachers who went to the U.S. on exchanges. Following up on the president's decision to make education a priority, Meredov said Turkmenistan welcomed U.S. professors to give lectures in Turkmenistan, a reference to recent embassy efforts to bring Fulbright Specialists to the country.

AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION SUPPORT

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¶16. (C) Meredov also sought to impress Feigenbaum with Turkmenistan's support for the ?rehabilitation? of Afghanistan. Feigenbaum asked whether Turkmenistan's interest in supplying electricity to Afghanistan might be waning. Meredov insisted that there were only technical details that needed clarification and that there was a need for improved Afghan infrastructure to support electricity supplied from Turkmenistan. He expressed hope that such issues would again be addressed during President Karzai's July 5-6 visit to Ashgabat.

UNSTICKING ?STUCK? PROPOSALS

¶17. (SBU) Feigenbaum expressed his basic agreement on the ?list of cooperation.? The United States had offered many ideas over the last six months; Turkmenistan had offered some ideas as well. Feigenbaum recalled President Berdimuhamedov's comment to him that the two sides now needed to "make things real." In that spirit, said Feigenbaum, we wished to move forward on the various U.S. projects and proposals, some of which appeared to be stalled. He offered three examples in three very different areas of U.S. proposals that awaited a response:

-- In the energy area: USAID's Regional Energy Markets Program,

-- In the education area: the education proposals generated from the DAS Romanowski delegation and delivered to Turkmenistan's government in a paper, and

-- In the political area: USAID's local self-government program.

Feigenbaum asked if the lack of response meant Turkmenistan was uninterested in these specific ideas, or whether the

programs still were under consideration.

¶18. (SBU) Meredov expressed gratitude for the proposals and offered his assurance that we would have heard if the Government of Turkmenistan had turned down any of the proposals. ?No answer does not mean no interest,? he said. Meredov explained that his ministry could facilitate ?sitting down? with the relevant technical ministries on any stalled proposals and then pushing for agreement. He added that no diplomatic note would be necessary, only a phone call to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which would arrange and attend any such meeting at which the two sides sought to reach agreement. Meredov described his ministry's role as a ?bridge? to facilitate agreement between parts of his government and the United States. Meredov (sincerely) added that he was disappointed that many programs have been stalled.

¶19. (SBU) Meredov offered to accept a list of stalled programs and to work with the embassy and relevant ministries to move them forward. He also welcomed contact without dipnotes, but via MFA, to address the same issues.

INVITATIONS TO VISIT THE UNITED STATES

¶10. (C) Feigenbaum explained the Department's invitation to Meredov, as well as the Ministers of Education, and Health, the Mayor of Ashgabat (to visit sister city, Albuquerque), and the Minister of Economy and Finance for the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) meeting as a new phase

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for deepening the growing bilateral relationship. "Many Americans came here in the first six months (of the Berdimuhamedov administration)," he noted. "Our focus in the next six months is to make this a two-way street by having Turkmenistan officials in areas of potential visit the United States." Meredov responded warmly to Feigenbaum's invitation and asked that he pass his words of thanks to the Secretary of State. He added that such visits were a logical step to follow the wave of recent U.S. delegations to visit Turkmenistan. He welcomed dates and specifics on the proposed visits that he could present to President Berdimuhamedov, promising to ?stress the relevance to the President.?

AMERICAN CORNERS AND EXPANDED CULTURAL COOPERATION

¶11. (SBU) Feigenbaum stressed the need to find a suitable location for the re-opening of the Turkmenbashi American Corner. American Corners were important, he said, and the U.S. would of course welcome a two-way cultural exchange and hoped to see Turkmen artists or performers visit the United States in the future. Meredov promised MFA support for the embassy's cultural programs in general (while dodging the issue of a venue for the Corner) and also welcomed the idea of Turkmen performers visiting the United States.

SURVEILLANCE DETECTION: "WE HAVE NOTHING IN WRITING"

¶12. (C) Feigenbaum raised the recent closing of embassy's Surveillance Detection program, stressing the difference between surveillance and surveillance detection (?detection is the key word?), and the embassy's willingness to find common ground that would allow the resumption of the program. He also noted to Meredov the high importance both to the White House and Congress of assuring the security of U.S. embassies overseas.

¶13. (C) Meredov replied that he understood the intent of the program, but talked sternly and at length about the fact that there was no written agreement for conducting the program with the host government. He spoke somewhat indignantly

about his government not knowing what security activities were taking place on its territory. He defended Turkmenistan's capacity and cooperation in providing security for the embassy and the diplomatic community. Meredov suggested, however, that the Ministry of National Security should engage with the embassy on the issue. Agreeing to disagree, Feigenbaum reiterated to Meredov the importance and high-level Washington interest in maintaining the Surveillance Detection program.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

¶14. (C) Turning to human rights, Feigenbaum thanked Meredov for the initial steps taken to remove names from the ?black list? of those prohibited from traveling abroad, and noted that sustained implementation of greater freedom of movement would be important. He recalled their lengthy discussion of various areas of human rights in January. As he had in January, he suggested cooperation with OSCE for future elections monitoring, including upcoming provincial and Mejlis (parliamentary) elections. Feigenbaum noted the planned visit of the USG human rights and democracy delegation. He noted concern in Washington about religious freedom, including harassment of believers and the need for registration. He noted that U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom planned to visit Turkmenistan in July.

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¶15. (C) Meredov spoke at length about Turkmenistan's efforts to improve human rights and develop democracy, repeating that the president had made it ?very clear? that he was ready to cooperate with the United States on democracy and human rights. Meredov emphasized the need to take a gradual approach, noting Berdimuhamedov's statement that there are various approaches to democratization, though the United States and Turkmenistan shared the same goal. He also cited recent steps that in his view have improved human rights in Turkmenistan. He noted the return to ten years of compulsory education, expanded Internet access, as well as greater freedom of movement as signs of improving human rights.

¶16. (C) In particular he considered the freedom of movement to be generally ?solved? and as something more than the removal of a few names from the black list. Meredov noted that Turkmenistan does not wish ?to publicize? this change. Turkmenistan, he said, had taken significant steps in this area in recent months. Failure to extend the Jackson-Vanik waiver, following Turkmenistan's efforts on freedom of movement, would be ?unfair? and would simply not be understood by his government.

¶17. (C) Turning to religious freedom, Meredov argued that registered religious groups no longer faced problems. He proposed another government-sponsored roundtable as a proven format for resolving misunderstandings between the government and religious groups. Noting that he and Feigenbaum had discussed the Catholic Church in January, Meredov said that the Church had not been registered because Turkmenistan's law required that a Turkmenistan citizen head the church within the country. The Charge suggested that the Polish-citizen priest and Vatican representative heading the church in Ashgabat be made an honorary citizen. Meredov laughed, but added that there should be some way to find a solution.

¶18. (C) Meredov talked generally about democratic development and praised U.S. proposals of programs to address reform. He stressed the vague, but strong, message that Turkmenistan is ready to cooperate in this area, but underlined that his country could not simply borrow a western model.

¶19. (C) Feigenbaum noted that there were different models of democracy and that no one seriously believed that Turkmenistan should become a ?carbon copy? of the United

States. But Feigenbaum underlined U.S. interest and encouragement for proceeding on the long path towards democracy, not least through the areas he had mentioned.

¶20. (C) Meredov said that Turkmenistan was willing to cooperate with the OSCE on election procedures for provincial Halk Mashlahaty (People's Council) voting later this year and the Mejlis (parliamentary) elections next year. He cited President Berdimuhamedov, saying that it was time to go from theory to practice in the area of democracy.

COMMENT

¶21. (C) Meredov again proved willing to discuss some of the trickiest issues in the bilateral relationship. Although vague on details, he made very clear Turkmenistan's willingness to cooperate in all areas, including democracy and human rights. His positive approach to U.S. efforts at turning the page appears genuine. Yet it is clear that Meredov's definitions and measures for success in reform differ from our expectations. Given local sensibilities, the country's past, and the government's perspective on threats

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to stability, post believes that Meredov's views and comments represent, at worst, a pro-forma effort to meet legalistic standards in areas such as human rights or election procedures; but at best, his comments could reflect an opportunity to meeting the spirit of greater freedoms and a greater voice for Turkmenistan's citizens. Meredov's prospective visit to Washington will offer an opportunity to engage on these subjects with President Berdimuhamedov's closest advisor -- and to better understand the pressures and challenges facing the President and Turkmenistan. END COMMENT

¶22. DAS Feigenbaum has cleared this message.
BRUSH